





WILLIAM BLAKE AT THE NATIONAL LIBRARY OF MEDICINE

WILLIAM BLAKE AS A BOOK ILLUSTRATOR

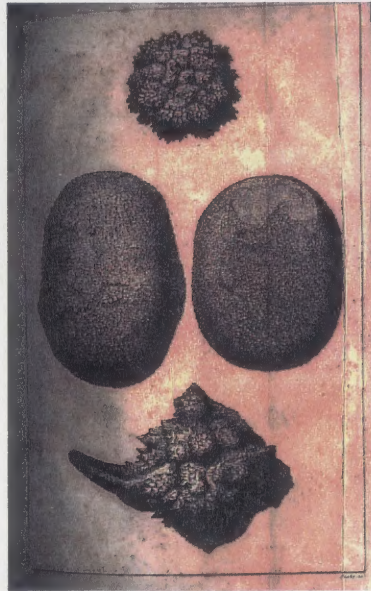
William Blake (1757-1827), famous for his poetry and painting, supported himself for many years by scrupulously crafting engraved book illustrations. Blake learned techniques of engraving, etching, stippling and copying from James Basire, to whom he was apprenticed. When his apprenticeship ended in 1778 at age twenty-one, he had many commissions. One that came eleven years later was for engravings to illustrate John Caspar Lavater's *Essays on Physiognomy*.

In 1789 Blake was one of several engravers working under the direction of Henry Fuseli to illustrate the Lavater work. Blake undertook definitely four and possibly five engravings for the first volume. Two of these were portraits and two more were decorative illustrations. The fifth, a portrait of Lavater himself, though not published in the *Essays*, was perhaps intended for it.



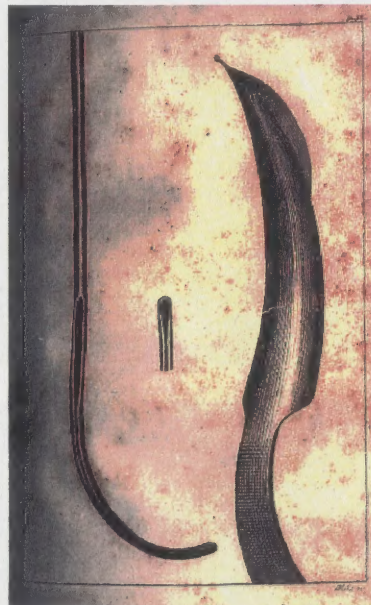
Etched for Lavater's *Essays in Physiognomy*, this picture may also have been drawn by Blake as well. In addition to being decorative, however, this scene showing two bearded

men, one planting a tree and the other watering another tree, with a castle or walled town in the background, could actually be an illustration for Lavater's text that directly precedes this plate. The text is an apology from the author for his book as he presents it to the public: He claims that it contains "not a complete Treatise, but merely Fragments of Physiognomy." The etching shows gardeners, each caring for singular trees, "Fragments" of a forest which appears to be growing up around them in the foreground and middle ground. Despite the author's apology, Blake's etching seems to prophesy a future growth for physiognomy as a science, tended by sturdy adherents, depicted by Blake as robed ancient philosophers.



Engravings for surgeon James Earle's *Practical Observations on the Operation for the Stone*, printed for Joseph Johnson, St. Paul's Church-Yard, 1793.

This engraving is one of two. Its companion is displayed below it. Earle was senior surgeon at St. Bartholomew's Hospital and also surgeon extraordinary to George III during this time. In this engraving, stones that have been extracted by Earle are shown. The technique used for this plate was a combination of etching and engraving on copper, typical of Blake's work and also of engraving in Europe during this time. Note the refinement and detail of work in this illustration. The texture of these stones is stressed by Blake's careful work: Earle describes both hard and irregularly shaped, but also soft and smooth stones in the text of his book. The combination of etching and engraving also provides a distinction between foreground and background, providing a sense of depth to the image.



This engraving depicts tools used by Earle to remove gall bladder and urethra stones. The gorget appears on the right and the staff on the left. In the center the very end of the gorget used to enter the urethra is shown face up, whereas it is shown face down in the left view, bottom. Notice the cross hatching technique Blake used in depicting the handle of the gorget at the bottom right of the picture. Cross-hatching here shows the difference in texture between the flattened curvature of the gorget handle and the convex curvature of the gorget blade.



Blake engraved this image for Lavater's *Essays on Physiognomy*, published in 1789, and it is quite possible that the original drawing is also by him: There is no indication of another delineator, such as appears in many of the portraits. This image, used as a decoration at the end of Lavater's nineteenth fragment on physiognomy, can also be linked to the text. Lavater's fragment ends with a pronouncement that "if reasoning were weighed with seriousness and attention," then objections to Lavater's statements about how facial composition reveals character "would fall to the ground of themselves." Blake's engraving shows flies coming close to the flame of a candle. Perhaps these are meant to symbolize the objections to Lavater's proposals about physiognomy: Coming so close to the brilliant light of his well-reasoned argument, they would fall like flies coming too close to an open flame.



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WILLIAM BLAKE'S TECHNIQUE

Blake's book illustration often incorporated more than one technique in a single plate. Tools used for book illustration varied, but the points or blades of each one could often be honed further by the etcher and engraver in order to create effects that appeared similar to those produced by other tools. An example of this relates to the enlargement of Edmund Pitts's chin from the full portrait. Here the stipple engraving accomplished on the chin could have been done using an etching needle, a stippling tool, or even a drypoint needle. The stippling tool was a special type of burin, or graver, that had a curved shaft which allowed the blade to skip over the plate, making tiny indentations in the copper.



Here is an enlargement of part of the face of the Blake illustration discussed later. The technique Blake used here is known as dot-and lozenge because of the method employed to show light and shadows. Notice the use of dots and slashes inside some of the diamond-shaped lozenges that Blake used to compose the face where light shading is shown. Where heavier shading was desired, Blake employed additional crosshatching within the lozenges. A tool called a burin was used for this engraving. The overall effect of this technique was a curving pattern of these lozenges that came together to form features of the human body. Blake used dot-and-lozenge engraving to create the facial features of the Lavater, Democritus, and Brown portraits also.



Edmund Pitts, (detail)

This enlargement of the chin and neck of the Pitts portrait (displayed later) demonstrates Blake's use of both crayon manner engraving and also stipple engraving. The face is done in stipple with the background and the coat in crayon manner engraving. Stipple engraving was done using a variety of different tools and Blake may have used more than one in order to create the different sized dots that we see in the face. Crayon manner engraving was done using a roulette, a tool fashioned like a wheel with sharp points along its circumference. The linear effect of this type of engraving can be seen here in the clothing and background of the Pitts portrait detail. Compare these techniques with the dot-and lozenge crosshatching technique shown in the detail displayed above this one.

For more information regarding this exhibit, contact David Vecchioli, History of Medicine Division, NLM, by phone (301 402-6155) or e-mail (david_vecchioli@ocshost.nlm.nih.gov) or Marcia Zorn, Bibliographic Services Division, by phone (301 496-7639) or e-mail (marcia_zorn@ocshost.nlm.nih.gov).



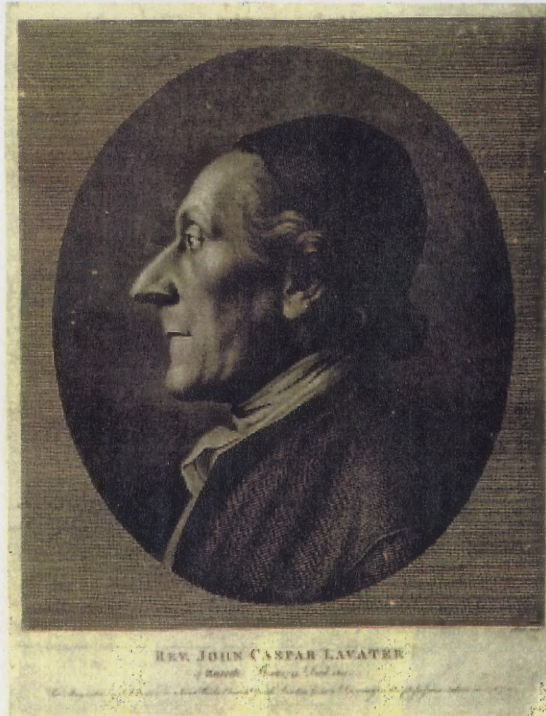
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WILLIAM BLAKE AS A PORTRAITIST

In 1779 Blake entered the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture, which opened in 1771. Sir Joshua Reynolds, the founder and first president of the Academy, was an artist who dominated England's "official art" of portraiture in an autocratic manner. Reynolds and his school enjoyed the patronage of persons from the English upper classes who wanted portrait art that glorified them, their property, and their lifestyle. Blake chose a different way.

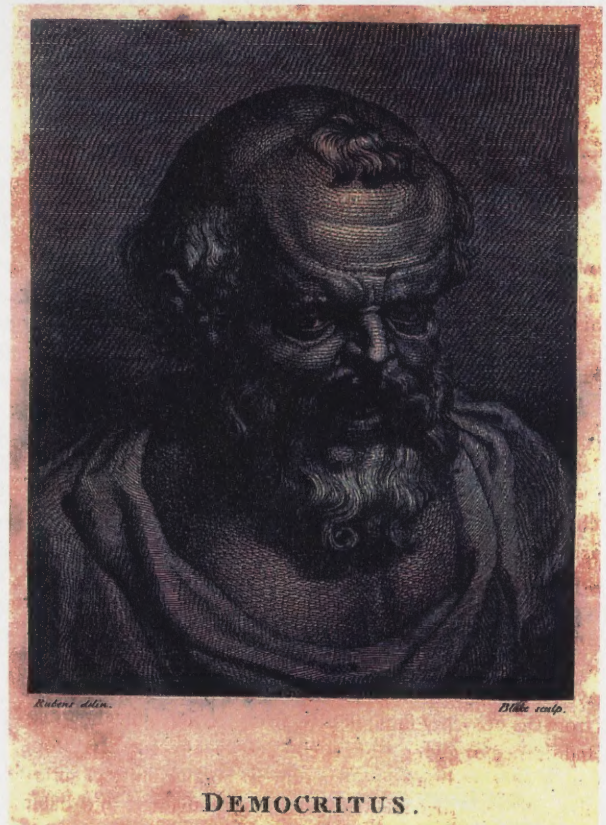
At the Academy, he associated with other artists. Among these was Henry Fuseli (1741-1825), a Swiss painter who became a professor of drawing at the Academy. Like Blake, Fuseli rebelled against Reynolds' strict rules of representation. Blake's handling of anatomy in his art shows the influence of Fuseli's highly dramatic depictions of figures in motion. Some of this influence can even be seen in his portraits. Notice especially the Lavater and Democritus portraits.

Fuseli attended the Collegium Curolinum at Zurich, but left with his school friend Johann Kaspar Lavater after they published a pamphlet exposing the corruption of a Zurich magistrate. Lavater no doubt wanted his old friend Fuseli's involvement in the illustration of his *Essays on Physiognomy*, the first volume of which was published in 1789. Blake worked on these illustrations under the direction of Fuseli, along with several other engravers. Blake also worked on independent commissions. Examples of his portraiture for some of these are displayed here too.



Rev. John Caspar Lavater, (1741-1801)

Lavater, a poet and theologian, is best remembered as inventor of the pseudoscience of phrenology called "physiognomy." Blake undertook this portrait in 1787 or earlier and there has been speculation about whether it might have originally been intended for use as a frontispiece to the first volume of the English translation of Lavater's *Essays on Physiognomy* published in 1789. The version displayed here was published in 1800 by Joseph Johnson, a London printer for whom Blake engraved on several occasions. The Lavater drawing from which Blake copied is by an unknown artist. Additional evidence is lent to the speculation that this was intended as a frontispiece due to the fact that a silhouette that shows the same profile was published in volume two of Lavater's *Essays*.



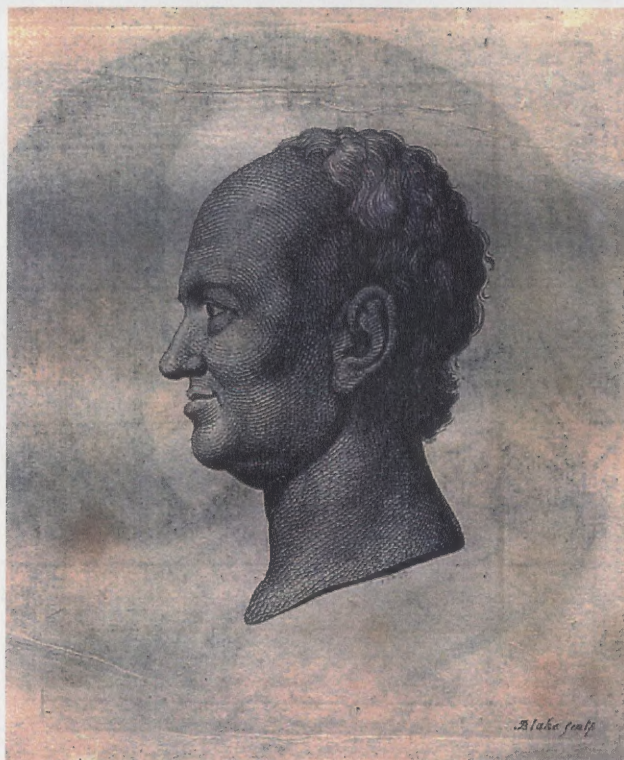
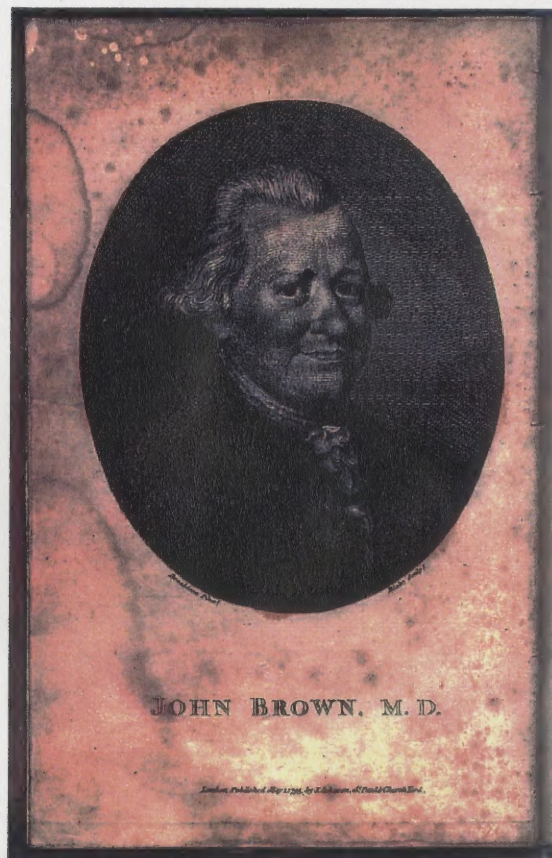
Democritus (c.460-470) was a celebrated Greek philosopher who wrote on the natural sciences, mathematics, morals, and music. Though known as the "laughing philosopher" in contrast to Heraclitus (c.500), the "weeping philosopher," the text of Lavater's *Essays on Physiognomy* that accompanies the image indicates that, as pictured, the grin is not of this mild nature. The grin of Democritus pictured here is sarcastic, not of pity, tenderness or beneficent humanity. Rather, it is a grin of contempt. Notice that the delineator of the original from which Blake copied was none other than Peter Paul Rubens, the famous Baroque painter and engraver.



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John Brown, M.D., (1735-1788)

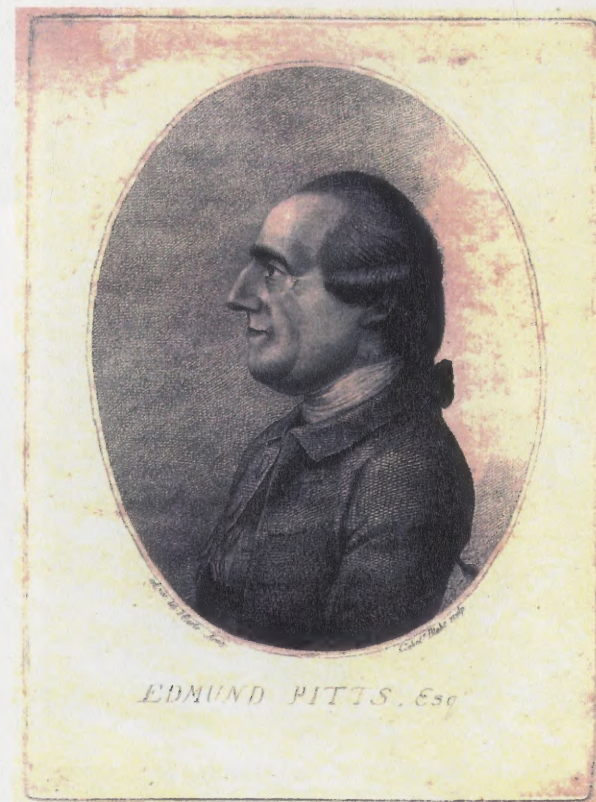
Brown translated *Elements of Medicine* from the Latin and published it in 1788. A later edition by Thomas Beddoes (1760-1808) extensively revised and corrected Brown's work. This portrait was published as the frontispiece to the 1795 revised edition. Engraved by Blake, it demonstrates his engagement of more traditional aspects of portraiture. Less remarkable than other portraits shown here, perhaps this one demonstrates some of the tortured work Blake did for hire, wrestling with ideas of new techniques that he wanted to use while still struggling with conformance to Reynoldsian convention.



Engraved by Blake for *Essays on Physiognomy*, published in 1789, this head was used by Lavater to demonstrate "a thinker who embraces a vast field." There is speculation that Blake engraved his own physiognomy here. For a more detailed description of Blake's engraving technique in this portrait, see the portrait detail (overleaf, opposite).

Edmund Pitts, Esq., (died 1791)

Pitts was a surgeon at St. Bartholomew's Hospital in London. This portrait was engraved by Blake from a drawing taken by James Earle, a fellow surgeon of Pitts at St. Bartholomew's. It is supposed that Earle intended the portrait to accompany an unpublished biography of Pitts, but that, when it came to naught, Earle had the portrait published separately as a memorial to his deceased friend.



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